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SUBJECT: SECTARIANISM UNDERMINES LOCAL CONFIDENCE IN
INTERFAITH INITIATIVE

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[1](#)B. 08 RIYADH 853
[1](#)C. 07 RIYADH 2223

Classified By: CG John Kincannon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Despite King Abdullah's efforts to foster religious tolerance, an increase in local sectarian tension and a series of perceived anti-Shi'a actions by Saudi authorities in the Eastern Province have undermined confidence among many Saudi Shi'a that the SAG's interfaith efforts will achieve results in the Kingdom. With tensions already heightened due to a widely-reported anti-Shi'a statement made by twenty-two Salafi sheikhs only three days prior to the June 4 - 6 Mecca Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, the SAG further stoked local ire by shutting down three long-operating unlicensed Shi'a mosques in the city of Khobar on June 5. Also in early June, authorities forced the closure of a Qatif-area women's hawza (Shi'a religious school) overseen by Jaafari court judge Sheikh Ghalib al-Hammad. In each case, the sheikh responsible for the mosque/hawza was detained and forced to sign a pledge to cease his religious activities. After prominent al-Ahsa sheikh Tawfiq al-Amir offered a strong rebuttal to the Salafis' statement in a Friday sermon, he was detained on June 22 and held for one week. Meanwhile, the highly publicized efforts of Sunni activist Mekhleef al-Shammari to promote unity among Muslims by praying at a Shi'a mosque resulted in a subsequent backlash, as threats of violence against the community leader forced cancellation of further planned events. While some remain hopeful that the King's initiative will bring change, others argue the discrepancy between royal statements and local realities points to King Abdullah's limited ability to promote change in the face of a well-entrenched political and religious establishment. END SUMMARY.

Vanguard Effort...

[1](#)2. (C) Advancing a long-held personal vision for greater inter-faith understanding, King Abdullah visited the Vatican to meet with Pope Benedict XVI in November 2007, the first ever meeting between a Saudi monarch and a Pope. Abdullah continued to focus on this vision in early 2008, speaking of its importance both publicly and privately, while allowing more hesitant members of the Saudi religious establishment to adjust to the idea. On June 4-6, the SAG organized in Mecca the first major conference of the effort, with the goal of promoting unity amongst various Islamic sects. With former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani attending alongside Saudi Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh, the Mecca gathering ended with calls to move forward in dialogue with other religions, without "giving up the religion's (Islam's)

fundamentals." As a next step King Abdullah will inaugurate the International Dialogue Conference, to be held in Madrid on July 16 - 18 (Reftel A). The Madrid conference will bring together Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders who, rather than focusing on political issues, will attempt to affirm fundamental shared religious values, including ideas such as international cooperation, human rights and peaceful coexistence.

...Undermined by Increased Tensions and Local Crackdown

¶3. (C) These ground-breaking efforts by King Abdullah have generated an underwhelming response from many of the Kingdom's Shi'a leaders, as the headline-making initiative has coincided with increased sectarian tensions and a recent crackdown by Saudi authorities on Shi'a religious activities in the Eastern Province. Tensions were initially heightened in the Kingdom when, on June 1, twenty-two Saudi Salafi religious leaders issued a harsh anti-Shi'a statement. Specifically referencing Iraq, Iran, Yemen and Hizbollah the statement accused Shi'a of "humiliating" Sunnis and added that they "sow strife, corruption and destruction among Muslims and destabilize security in Muslim countries." Saudi Shi'a point out that many of the twenty-two signatories enjoy close ties to the SAG and the SAG took no steps to refute the statement, although one Saudi official told the Associated Press, on the condition of anonymity, that the sheikhs' comments did not represent the views of the SAG. With this backdrop the Mecca conference was held, with a reported 500

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participants coming from all over the world. Despite this impressive number of attendees, and the presence of Rafsanjani, EP contacts report that the only Saudi Shi'a leaders in attendance were Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar and his brother, Sheikh Mohammed al-Saffar.

¶4. (C) With sectarian stresses already running high, on June 5, the second day of the Mecca Conference, city of Khobar Mabath - acting on orders from the office of EP Governor Mohammad bin Fahd - closed three unlicensed Shi'a mosques which local contacts say had operated for more than three decades. Each mosque's imam was detained along with a small number of worshippers. They were released after signing pledges not to continue their religious activities. According to Ali al-Huwaider (protect), who had previously attended these unlicensed mosques, in the weeks following the closure of the three mosques, Ali al-Gharib of the Doha area of Khobar was similarly detained after inviting a large group to pray in his home. NOTE: While it might seem acceptable that authorities shut down unlicensed mosques, Shi'a point to the fact that unlicensed mosques and husseiniyyas exist throughout the EP and that these particular mosques had operated - with the local authorities' knowledge - for decades. Due to the difficulty of obtaining licenses for Shi'a religious establishments, particularly outside of Qatif and al-Ahsa, a gray area of permissible activity exists in which well-known but "unofficial" religious institutions operate in cities like Dammam and Khobar (Reftel B). END NOTE.

¶5. (C) Also in early June, Eastern Province Mabath forced a women's hawza (Shi'a religious school) in Tarut to close, detaining the hawza's manager, Sheikh Ghalib al-Hammad, until he signed a pledge to stop all hawza activity. The school had some two hundred students and was notable not only because it was one of the few Shi'a religious schools offering training for women, but also because Sheikh al-Hammad is one of the three judges who make up the Appeals Court in the Jaafari court system. Banned Shi'a website rasid.com reports that authorities gave no reason for the closure of the hawza. In addition to the closure of the Khobar mosques and the Tarut hawza - both events widely known in the Shi'a community - Shi'a leader Jafar al-Shayeb (protect) also told PolOff of other lesser-known incidents

that had led him to question if these might be deliberate efforts to undermine interfaith progress. Chief among them was a negotiation process with the SAG regarding a request to use a portion of a Sunni cemetery in Dammam for Shi'a burial.

Al-Shayeb told PolOff that after a long effort in which Shi'a community leaders worked with the Human Rights Commission to gain permission from the Royal Court, the process has now completely stagnated as the EP Governor's office has blocked implementation.

16. (C) With sectarian pressure continuing to run high, and after the events of Khobar, Dammam and Qatif, on Friday, June 20, prominent al-Ahsa imam Sheikh Tawfiq al-Amer delivered an impassioned sermon attacking the twenty-two Salafi signatories of the anti-Shi'a statement. Accusing the sheikhs of creating an atmosphere of tension, al-Amer demanded increased rights and freedoms for the Shi'a majority in al-Ahsa province. In response, al-Ahsa Mabahith, on the order of al-Ahsa Governor Badr bin Jiluwi, detained the Sheikh on June 22, holding him without charge for seven days.

According to Mohammad al-Jubran (protect), a member of the National Society for Human Rights, al-Amer was held for a week because he had refused to sign a statement offered by Hasawi authorities pledging to end his speeches calling for increased Shi'a rights.

Threats Deter Sunni Leader's Attempts at Reconciliation

17. (C) In an effort to provide a grassroots element to the high-level interfaith initiative, on June 13 Sunni human rights activist Mekhleef al-Shammari attended the mosque of leading Qatif sheikh Hassan al-Saffar to join Shi'a in Friday prayer. The effort generated significant attention in Internet media, garnering both positive and negative comments. As a follow-up, Al-Shammari and like-minded Qatifi Shi'a announced they would join together for Friday prayer on June 20 in Khobar's Crown Prince Sultan mosque, a Sunni place of worship. Due to a deluge of death threats however, the event never happened. While Internet blogs saw numerous comments threatening violence against the group, al-Shammari did not cancel the event until he received a call to meet

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with the Khobar Mabahith. According to Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb (protect), who was in close contact with al-Shammari, the Mabahith officers told al-Shammari they supported his efforts to build bridges with the Shi'a community, but believed the possibility of violence at the Sultan mosque was too high to proceed with the proposed event. Despite canceling the event, on June 24, a sword wielding assailant attacked the Khobar house of al-Shammari, attempting to break into the building. Al-Shammari contacted area police and neither he nor his family was hurt. Al-Mugaiteeb reports that al-Shammari has been given police protection to prevent any further attacks.

Theories of Royal Intrigue

18. (C) After the 2007 up-tick in Eastern Province sectarian incidents, particularly in al-Ahsa, the first half of 2008 has been comparatively quiet. The 2008 commemorations of Ashura, Arbaeen and other Shi'a occasions had seen relatively few documented incidents of sectarian-inspired detentions by Saudi authorities (Reftel C). With King Abdullah's talk of interfaith dialogue building on this slight momentum, June's events have created confusion and convinced many that King Abdullah's institutional power within the Kingdom is significantly limited. No Shi'a leader saw the timing of these closures and arrests as purely coincidental, and some express the view that it is an effort by Interior Minister Prince Naif, with the implicit support of his Sudairi brethren, to flex his institutional muscle against the King's

efforts. Naif enjoys close ties to EP Governor Prince Mohammed bin Fahd (this thanks to the Sudairi lineage and Mohammed's marriage to Naif's daughter). Many believe that Naif, working through EP Governor Mohammed, controls the province's religious freedom agenda. Whatever the true reason, there is a clear disconnect between the efforts of the King and the actions of the EP authorities.

¶9. (C) Many in the Shi'a community dismiss the King's recent initiative for interfaith dialogue. It is too soon, however, to judge the ultimate effect of the King's efforts. Leading Shi'a sheikh Hassan al-Saffar continues to support the King's initiative and at this time plans to attend the Madrid Conference. Al-Saffar continues working toward sectarian reconciliation, recently bringing Sheikh Dr. Mohammed al-Najimi, a prominent Sunni cleric and member of the Islamic Fiqh Academy, to Qatif for a joint conference with the community. Al-Saffar also brought together eighty-five Shi'a clerics - including the likes of Abdulkarim al-Hubail, recognized as a leading Saudi Hizbollah figure - to issue a joint statement responding to the twenty-two Salafis by calling for Islamic unity and urging "our brothers who call for fatwas" to revise their strategy and forget the hostility of past generations.

¶10. (C) Some, like pragmatic Qatif Municipal Councilman Isa al-Muzel, believe the King will continue working past this imperfect first step, and that through focusing on increased citizen participation there will be a brighter and more tolerant future ahead. Meanwhile, in a July 8 meeting, moderate Sunni imam Sheikh Adel al-Ghoneim told PolOff that the interfaith initiative will create change, but only with time. According to the imam, while events on the ground might remain stagnant, attitudes will change with a continued focus on tolerance.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: The question is how much time remains. Some fear that the continued discrepancy between high-level calls for unity and ground-level actions against it will doom any chance for progress. The more important concern, however, is whether the interfaith initiative will continue past the reign of King Abdullah. In a process that demands long-term commitment, the events of the past month call into question just how deep and wide the commitment of the royal family to interfaith dialogue runs. END COMMENT.

(APPROVED: JKINCANNON)
FRAKER